STORIES OF THE WAR

UKRAINE YOUTH AMBASSADORS

PEACE BOAT

WHAT ARE THE UKRAINE YOUTH AMBASSADORS?

Ukraine Youth Ambassadors was a three-and-a-half-month programme organized onboard Peace Boat on its 117th Global Voyage, 2024. Young Ukrainian students and professionals living in Japan—most of whom had fled Ukraine due to the war—joined the entire voyage. They visited 20 countries around the world in Asia, the Indian Ocean, Africa, Europe, and North America in order to tell the world about the war in their country and to appeal for international support for peace in Ukraine.

The voyage provided many opportunities for the Youth Ambassadors for network building, skills development, and empowerment of young people to become leaders for the future of their country.

At events in 13 ports of call around the world, the Youth Ambassadors met with think tanks and non-governmental organizations, researchers and policymakers, as well as youth and members of the public to share their war testimonies and youth visions for peace and the future of Ukraine. Onboard the ship, they held lectures, workshops, and dialogue sessions introducing Ukrainian history, politics, and culture.

ABOUT THE STORIES

During the voyage, the Ambassadors shared their personal stories, giving heartfelt testimonies about witnessing the full-scale Russian military invasion firsthand, fleeing their homeland, and living as displaced persons in Japan.

The way these young Ukrainians tell their stories sheds light on how young hearts and minds perceive the sudden disruption of a peaceful life and the outbreak of war in all its inhumanity. Their stories help us better understand how war profoundly alters the lives of young people, their families, and their friends when survival becomes the only goal. They also remind us of how fragile peace is and how much more we must do to protect and promote peace within our communities and around the world.

ABOUT PEACE BOAT

Peace Boat is a Japan-based international non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to promoting peace, human rights, and sustainability. Established in 1983, it holds Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations (UN). Every year, it organizes three global voyages as well as shorter regional cruises.
For over 40 years, Peace Boat's Global Voyages have offered a unique programme of activities, including lectures, workshops, experiential learning, and intercultural communication, both onboard and in the countries visited.

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B R I D G E S

What War Has Taught Me

Antonina Korotenko

ACTRESS

Antonina is a professional film and theater actress from Kyiv, who worked in the Drama Theater in Kyiv until 2022. She is now living in Ageo City, Japan, where she managed to continue her acting career, appearing in various TV series and advertisements. She was recently involved in a TV show on NHK and worked for EXPO2025.

> “Just yesterday evening, my friends and I were discussing what we would do over the weekend, making plans, discussing our work, and today—the war has started. It hit me like a bolt from the blue.”

On February 24, 2022, at 5 a.m., the first explosions from missile strikes were heard in Kyiv. The Russian military's invasion of Ukraine had begun. In the morning, the Russian army launched an offensive on Kyiv from the territory of Belarus.

It was a morning I will remember for the rest of my life. I was still sleeping when my mother came into my room. She was very nervous, almost crying, and barely able to contain her emotions. She said, “Tonya, get up, we're being bombed. The war has started.” Who could ever imagine being woken up with such words? I couldn't even believe her at first. Simply because I couldn't wrap my head around how this could even happen?! After all, just yesterday evening, my friends and I were discussing what we would do over the weekend, making plans, discussing our work, and today—the war has started. It hit me like a bolt from the blue. I was at a complete loss, and I think, at that time, I had no idea what the words “war has started” really meant.

Everything we worried about yesterday no longer seemed so significant, and it quickly became clear what was truly important in the new reality. The first thing I did that morning was to call my fiancé. I woke him up with the same news I had just been woken up with and asked him to pack the bare minimum necessities and come over.

But the circumstances around us didn't wait for us to think and plan anything. After a massive air raid, Russian troops landed at Antonov Airport, just 25 kilometers from Kyiv, and continued to approach the city. And the very next day, our capital Kyiv, with its 2.9 million people, was turned into a city of barricades, roadblocks, and trenches. Anti-tank ‘hedgehogs’ were set up on all the main streets and highways, and subway stations were turned into bomb shelters for civilians.

After it became known that a group of Russian saboteurs had entered the city, a strict curfew was imposed in Kyiv on February 26, which lasted almost two days. It was probably the longest two days of my life. Because when you sit and listen to military vehicles driving down the streets, planes flying overhead, shots flying somewhere around, and you don't know what to expect the next moment, time drags on for a very long time.

“Kyiv, with its 2.9 million people, was turned into a city of barricades, roadblocks and trenches.”

We all tried to stay calm at home and avoid falling into any kind of panic. We even tried to joke with each other to lighten the atmosphere. But, in truth, of course, we were all very tense, and we could not do anything else but listen to every rustle outside. The same questions were running through the minds of all of us... 'What should we do if Russian soldiers come in here?', 'What should we do if a bomb hits our house?', 'What should we do...?' We didn't say it out loud, we didn't talk about it with each other, but these thoughts could easily be read on our faces. And the worst of it was that I had never felt so helpless. I finally decided that just sitting around watching or imagining what was happening outside was unbearable. I started to think that there must be something I could do in this situation.

On February 28, when the curfew ended and we were allowed to leave our houses, I went outside and saw our capital like never before. Kyiv was empty. There were almost no people on the streets, no cars on the roads. It seemed that even time had stopped in our bustling city. It was strange and frightening. At that moment, my hometown resembled scenes from post-apocalyptic movies. Is this real? And then I thought with cold fear, 'What if this is how it stays forever?'

Move and Do Something!

A few days later, we learned from the news that 1.9 million people left Kyiv at the beginning of the war, almost half of the city's population. And the half that stayed were mostly elderly people who were left alone or people with disabilities, low-income families, and generally people who were unable to leave or take care of themselves. The entire economic structure of the city's life also stopped. There was a deficit of food products and, worst of all, medicines.

With all this in mind, I decided that the only way I could influence the situation was to help the people who had stayed here and needed help. So, on March 3, my fiancé, Yura, and I opened a volunteer humanitarian center to help the civilian population. We turned the premises of the theater where we both worked into a warehouse for humanitarian aid and a distribution point. The basement with theater equipment turned into a bomb shelter, and our car into an evacuation vehicle. To be honest, at the very beginning, we had no idea where to look for humanitarian aid and what we could do alone. But it was just a matter of getting started doing something.

On the first day of our humanitarian center's work, there were just the two of us, and we had a small number of food items that we managed to buy in a store nearby, so we were only able to provide food for two or three elderly people. But after five days, in less than a week, we received enough food to supply a small village. From the two people who were there at the beginning, a whole team of volunteers was formed in just a few days. Almost every day, I received calls from other people who wanted to join, become volunteers, and help in any possible way. Yes, it is true that when you are alone, you can do very little. But once you start, once you take the first step, other like-minded people will follow, will be found, and will join. That's the first among other things the war has taught me.

Over time, we began to receive help from other countries. Humanitarian aid was sent to our center from America, Germany, Poland, Romania, and even from the Vatican. This allowed us to deliver aid outside Kyiv too, to the towns where there were many refugees or the towns near the frontlines which were cut off from the supply routes.

Soon, we discovered that we could do one more thing: we started helping evacuate civilians from the Kyiv region, where military attacks were intensifying.

How to Cross the Bridge?

To stop Russian troops from entering Kyiv, all bridges in the southeast area of the city were blown up. The people who remained on the other side of the bridges were trapped. Some Ukrainian towns had already been invaded by Russian troops, while others were subjected to repeated daily artillery shelling. For a long time, the Kyiv city council was unable to evacuate civilians from these areas, so people were forced to either wait for help or attempt to escape on their own.

In the first week of March, for several days in a row, we helped evacuate people from Bucha, Irpin, Vorzel, and Gostomel. The only way for these people to escape from the areas under attack and reach Kyiv was to somehow make it to one of the destroyed bridges. Those who had cars drove and left them at the bridges, while others walked, sometimes even under fire. We took people from under the bridge and drove them to the Kyiv railway station in our own cars.

However, many settlements in Russian-occupied territory were cut off from all communications from the very beginning of the war: no mobile connections, no internet, and no food or water supplies. The people who stayed there were unable to contact anyone. Yura, my fiancé and a fellow volunteer, worked tirelessly to figure out how we could reach these areas and help those trapped. He discovered that our car could cross one of the destroyed bridges. He made it! He drove to the nearest village to help evacuate people and distribute food.

But then, he was captured by Russian soldiers. Without going into details, I will only say that he was incredibly lucky to escape with his life and return home. He now considers that day his second birthday. The food he was carrying was confiscated, but the soldiers allowed him to evacuate one injured woman whose house had collapsed during a bombing raid. Looking back, I remember that in the early weeks of the war, we couldn't even imagine the scale of the tragedy that would befall these towns under occupation.

The Battle for Kyiv

The battle for the Kyiv region lasted one month, one week, and one day. On April 2, 2022, it was officially announced that Russian troops had completely retreated from the region. By April 4, we were permitted to go on humanitarian missions to the liberated cities and towns. These missions were always escorted by military convoys, as the area was still unsafe.

No matter which village or town we entered, the scenes were the same everywhere—devastation. Ruined towns, destroyed houses, shattered lives. Hundreds and thousands of lives ruined by a war they didn't ask for.

> **"...for several days in a row, we helped evacuate people from Bucha, Irpin, Vorzel, and Gostomel."**

The Value of Life

I try not to think about it too much—about what I saw in those bombed-out cities, about the stories I heard from the people we evacuated, about those who lived under occupation and waited desperately for help. It's painful. Even now, with some time behind me, it remains hard.

But I also try hard not to forget. I don't want to forget what I saw, heard, and felt. This whole terrible experience has taught me one very important thing: to value life. Not just my own life, but the lives of others.

In one month of activity, our center was able to help more than 3,500 people and around 1,500 animals. These numbers may not seem significant on the scale of a country, or even a single city. But they are significant when you consider what could have happened if we had just sat and watched.

“I try hard not to forget. I don't want to forget what I saw, heard, and felt. This whole terrible experience has taught me one very important thing: to value life. Not just my own life, but the lives of others.”

M E M O R I E S

A View of the War from My Terrace

Sofiia Demydenko

STUDENT

Sofiia was born and raised in Kharkiv, Ukraine, where she graduated in Business Management at Kharkiv National University and completed various university studies in France, Spain, and Germany. In 2022, she arrived in Japan and continued her studies at Keio University. Her major is business management, administration, and mediation. She lives in Tokyo.

> “The first days of the war were like a nightmare. You check the latest news on your phone, you hear an explosion—you run to the window...your eyes look for smoke... All your thoughts seem to be here in this horror, but you feel somehow as if it is not happening to you.”

I

At five in the morning, clear sounds of explosions were heard outside the city limits, and my father, who entered the room and checked the situation through the window, calmly said: “Well, it has begun. Sleep while we're safe. In any case, we can't change it." No one could sleep after this. So many questions popped up in my head at once: “And what is it, a war?”, “What will happen to us?”, “How dangerous is it?”, and of course, the most obvious and loudest question that never leaves your mind: “Are we going to die?”

Just in case, we put some survival essentials into small backpacks—food and warm clothes. My parents did not want to leave the house and considered leaving the city only in case of extreme danger. The neighbors had already left home by eight o’clock in the morning. People were moving everywhere. They packed all their belongings as if they had already decided not to return home at all, or, on the contrary, they took very few things, thinking they would leave only for a couple of days.

The first days of the war were like a nightmare. You check the latest news on your phone, you hear an explosion—you run to the window to check where it is, your eyes look for smoke... All your thoughts seem to be here in this horror, but you feel somehow as if it is not happening to you.

Communication in my family became strange. Everyone tried not to crush or frighten each other, and that's why the topics of conversation were either completely simple or, all of a sudden, we would become all too tense. Mom took my sister to the corridor as soon as closer explosions were heard, while my dad and brother either did not move at all or did the opposite. It was so strange to feel that our house was no longer our safe home. Every time I went to bed, I looked at the walls and remembered how I had chosen wallpaper with my mother for this room. Then I thought—what if a missile flies in and blows everything up?! Nights were restless, not at all sleepy. Any rustle you hear and you are already on edge. A city without lights exudes fear at night, and a glow on the horizon from fighting outside the city limits you see as death, step by step approaching you. All this is just a dream and one day it will end. First hours, then days and weeks pass, but there is still no change.

II

All the shelves in the stores were empty, same as the streets of the city. Life froze in this terrible grayness. Explosions, silence, explosions. The silence was even more frightening since it seemed that the longer it stretched, the worse and more sudden its end would be. We could hear rocket launches outside the city limits, the so-called "outputs." And if you hear a whistle after a rocket is launched, it means the rocket will fly over you. But if you don't hear anything, then there is a risk it will explode near you.

After a couple of days of war, you begin to distinguish between "outputs." All the residents of the house freeze after a series of launches, look at each other, and the quickest says “it’s ours,” which means our soldiers. That gave us a good feeling, thinking that our people were doing something and were trying to protect us. When rocket launches became frequent from either side, it was easier to determine their locations, and therefore all tried to avoid many and frequent launches. Not knowing where the troops were, the launches and shooting would be random, which would turn targeted areas into ruins. A sieve instead of the walls of houses, a warehouse of logs instead of a roof, flying foam plastic from the torn lining of insulation for house walls.

The beginning of March turned out to be a nightmare. Get used to shooting launchers—okay. Go sometimes in the corridor to sit during the shooting—so be it. The Internet connection is jammed—we will get over it. But to hear the rumble under the very ceiling of your house and realize that it is a bomber—here you are already afraid of something very real. At first, the rumble simply grows from different sides, and then the planes enter repeated circles above the city, preparing to drop the bombs. At such moments, you think about everything at once and nothing at the same time.

Everyone reacts according to the situation around, trying to be as rational as possible. But to see your mother lying on the floor with hands over her head screaming “Lie down!!!” makes you doubt the rationality of what is happening around you... It is painful to be aware of what is happening... to think of the possible loss for which the mind begins to prepare you in order to endure it all more easily. And then... a heavy explosion, whose vibrations spread hundreds and thousands of meters around. One more. Five hundred kilos of death just fell somewhere in the western part of the city, but we heard it in the East as if it had happened in the neighboring quarter. And one more. Imagination is torn apart in attempts to imagine the scale of destruction that occurred in the pitch darkness of the spring night. At this point, you don’t want to know what was destroyed... Maybe your favorite places disappeared... and people you know will not even be able to be buried normally after such an explosion. "There's no more TV network and communication tower," says Dad. In the depths of the night, people went out to extinguish the fires and call their relatives, who may no longer be alive.

III

The reality is not a video on the screen which you can switch off. You can’t shut out the reality, you can’t leave it for a minute, you can’t change the volume. It simply breaks your soul over and over again and tests the remnant of nerves for strength. You don’t even know whether to be afraid or angry, want something or hide from everything. You expect a miracle, which does not happen.
In order to distract us from what was happening, we tried to come up with some ideas to be busy for at least thirty minutes. Half an hour of rest for the brain, trying to feel life at least briefly during a day. Shortages of electricity, communications, water, and food become a reality that you get used to not in days but in hours. There is no need for these amenities when the head is filled with constant fear for loved ones, the future, and for one's own life. How to stop always being nervous?!
My sister and I made a hut of blankets and pillows, which became our fortress—or at least that was our imagination. Such things helped make things less scary. You just sit under a canopy of a few millimeters of fabric and think that you are not in danger, or you try to imagine that all around you is not so frightening. In our hut, there was everything necessary for a peaceful life: a table lamp, a bottle of water, a couple of board games, a bedsheet and pillow for sleeping, a sewing kit, and, of course, our cat. If our pet was with us, war couldn’t come to us. We would embrace her and try to fall asleep.

“My sister and I made a hut of blankets and pillows, which became our fortress...you try to imagine that all around you is not so frightening.”

We played the boardgame, Monopoly, every day. Our task was to occupy our heads with something other than war, and despite the fact that it was impossible to think about the game, the players still got the opportunity to control at least something at that moment.

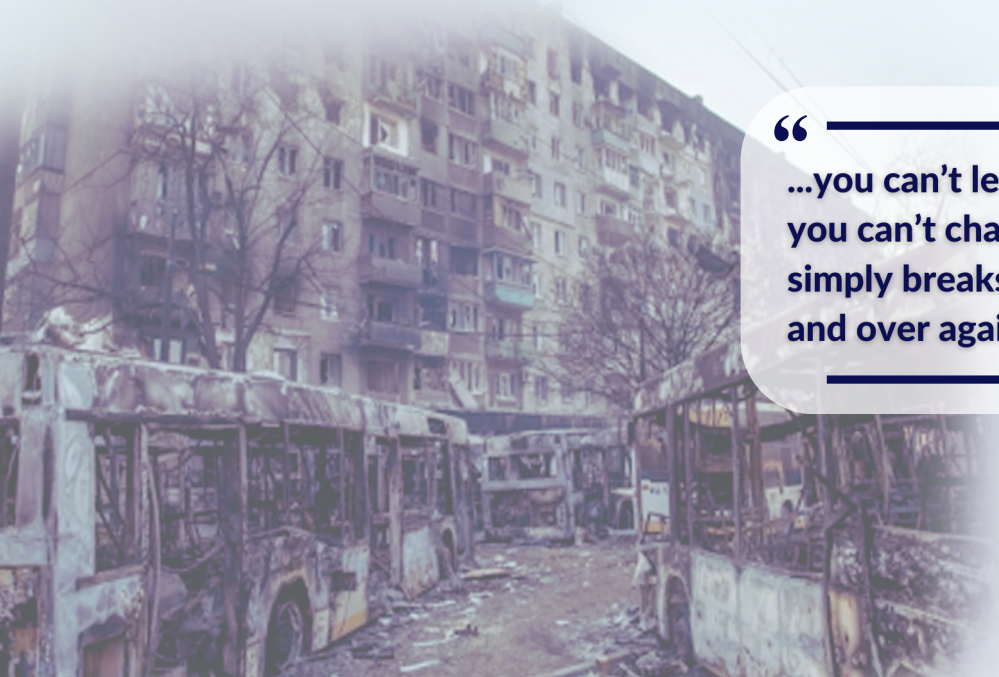
IV

Each new event in the city was described in the news or discussed in group chats at the speed of light. People reported things that they witnessed. My friend lived in the area on the opposite side of the river. We would chat often. One day, all the same, my friend responded with a short message, not very emotional or informative, but I knew that something had happened. When the hurricane cassette shells hit the ground, their fragments hit everything around in all possible directions. Several of these fragments landed in my friend's yard. The house was scratched, the tenants were frightened, but still, the fragments were not too big and none got inside the house.
A little later, they went out into the yard and saw that the favorite of the family and all neighbors, a big, lovely dog named Utah, was bleeding in front of their eyes. It died that day.

V

I have always loved to look at the city from our terrace, which had so many flowers and plants. I could see the river and several city areas. I could see nature, the lights in the night, the buildings in the city center, and the city line where the rural settlements begin. Who would have thought that one day I would stand on this terrace to observe how the front line was moving and to watch the tanks.
The rumble of tanks on the second day of the war confused our entire family and neighbors. “Did the enemy take over the city?”, “Maybe those are our tanks?”, “Why are they so loud?”, “How many of them?” These questions were simple and unanswered. I did not want to believe that in the morning we would wake up in another country.

There were battles on the streets. Quietly pushing back the curtains and peeling off the protective tapes on the glass, the elderly residents in private houses photographed the movement of the Russian "Tigers" along the alleys. Who would have thought that the smartphones given by grandchildren to share photos and messages would be used to expose the movements of the enemy? On the fifth day, it became completely clear that the city would not be taken. The enemy retreated out of the city, destroying everything on the way back. They forced the inhabitants from occupied areas to leave their houses and escape to the city.

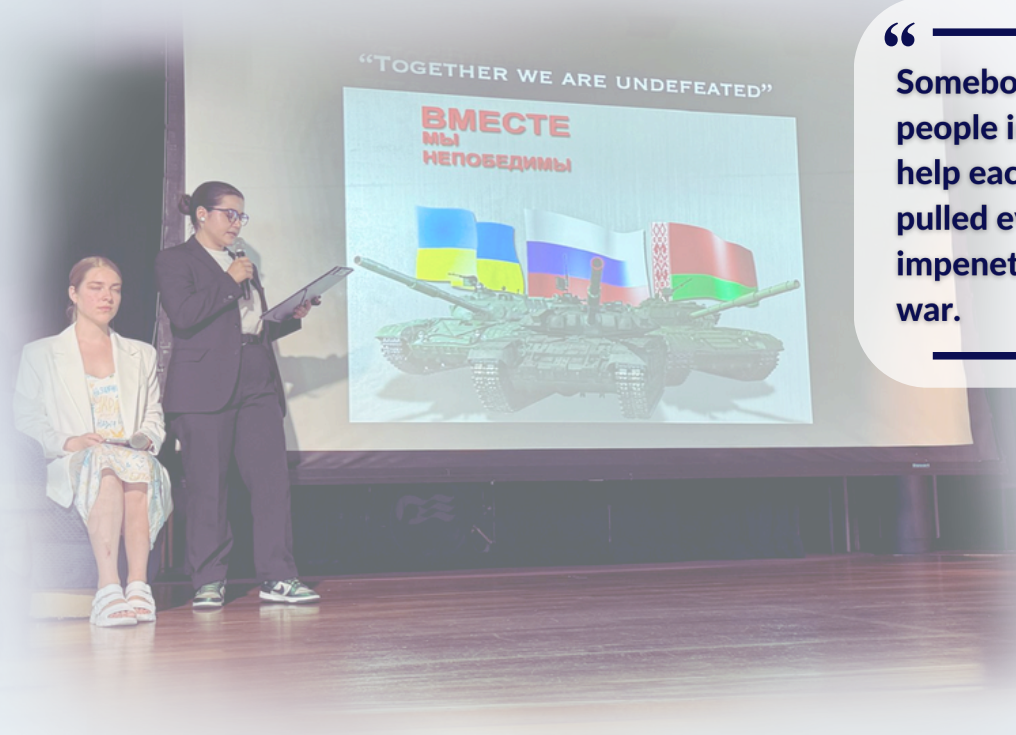


> **“...you can’t leave it for a minute, you can’t change the volume. It simply breaks your soul over and over again...”**

Instagram became a tool for disseminating information. It helped quickly locate victims in any incident and also to find volunteers who could help. The residents searched for hard-to-reach medications, missing people, or essential products. Somebody would react and help people in need. The desire to help each other in difficult times pulled everyone out of the impenetrable gravity of life in war.
“Distribute. The dog shelter was damaged as a result of shelling; funds and good hands are urgently needed to help pets.” Very soon there was money, a new shelter, and new owners for some of the dogs.

VI
Once there was a shelling of another residential area. The news thundered throughout the city. “This morning, a rocket hit the house. Two families with newborn children were hiding in the basement. Unfortunately, the parents did not survive. The children need to find a family." There was probably not a single person who heard this news and did not feel their heart break.
Two hours after the dissemination of the news, there were so many families who wanted to accept the newborn children and take care of them as their own that a queue was formed. By evening, new information was published: “The parents of the children survived; they were found in the rubble of the house. This is a miracle. Thanks to everyone who was ready to take the kids in—it’s good that they will still stay with their parents.” Such news brought the belief that everything bad would end, that good would conquer evil, and that life would conquer death.

But war is ugly from the beginning to the end. Once, through my brother's acquaintances, we heard about a family that lived outside the city. Their village remained under occupation, and they decided to escape to the city. The message was: “If anyone has seen an old gray Volkswagen with five passengers—a father, a mother, and three children—in the eastern district of the city, please let us know. The family name is listed below. These are our friends; we worry about them.”
Again, everyone was busy trying to find out any information, any clue to help in the search for this family. But there was silence. For several weeks, there was no news. Then, we got some new information: “To everyone who helped in the search, thanks. The family was found on the road at the entrance of the city when trying to escape from the occupation. The car was rammed and shot by machine guns. All passengers, including small children, were killed right there.”



“Somebody would react and help people in need. The desire to help each other in difficult times pulled everyone out of the impenetrable gravity of life in war.”

VII

The meaning of what was happening still haunts me. I try to stick with the memories from before the war, but some spark always triggers the memory, and the flow of images from war can no longer be stopped. I don't believe that the war is ending soon and that peace is returning to my hometown.

I went to visit my family almost two years after the beginning of the war and found out that time had not only stopped there, it was simply not there—like when I was there. This awareness shook me deeply and very unpleasantly. I still cannot understand how my relatives live in this situation every single day, but I understand why they chose to stay there and fight in their own way.

It is hard to say whether I am a coward or not for leaving my town in the first months of war. I am trying to find answers to many questions.

“The meaning of what was happening still haunts me. I try to stick with the memories from before the war, but some spark always triggers the memory.”

C O N N E C T I O N

From Japan To Ukraine

Tetiana Vazhynska

GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Tetiana is a professional graphic and web designer, born and raised in Kharkiv. She was a ballet dancer at the Kharkiv Ballet School and worked in Kyiv as a sports uniform designer for the Ukrainian Winter Olympics Team. Following her fascination with Japanese design art, she moved to Tokyo in 2018 and continued her career as a graphic designer there. She has worked for a number of companies as a web designer.

“ ...the first thing I did was contact my family. My hands were trembling, and my mind was clouded. I couldn’t believe this was reality.”

I was terrified by the stories of the Apocalypse in my childhood, and therefore I ended up watching and reading a lot about survival techniques if the end of the world came. I couldn't imagine that people in my country, my family, and friends would soon need such knowledge.

For many of us Ukrainians, the Apocalypse happened on February 24, 2022, when Russia began a full-scale invasion of our country.

At that time, I was not in Ukraine. I had followed my dream to live in Japan and had just started my new position as a designer in a quite successful small startup company, where I was in charge of the company's official homepage design and the graphic design of advertising materials, like flyers, exhibition booths, and graphics for videos.

One morning, I was working in the office when I suddenly started seeing notifications on my phone about missile attacks on Kharkiv, my hometown. It was supposed to be early morning in Ukraine, and the first thing I did was contact my family. My hands were trembling, and my mind was clouded. I couldn't believe this was reality. It was like in one of those Hollywood movies, "2012" or "War of the Worlds."

Luckily, my parents and friends were not hurt that morning, but they were really scared. My Japanese boss was informed about the situation and suggested that I take the day off. The rest of the day I spent on my phone, scrolling for news and messages. My phone was the only connection with my native land.
How could Russia betray us? Why do they attack while calling us brothers? It's the 21st century—how can an armed conflict happen in my own peaceful city? All the common history we had, all the illusions of "brotherly nations," vanished that day. We didn't know what to expect from now on. All we knew was that the priority was to survive.

“For many of us Ukrainians, the Apocalypse happened on February 22, 2022, when Russia began a full-scale invasion of our country.”

My parents' house is located just in front of the aviation college, which was a potential target for Russian attacks. And that's what eventually happened. The missile attack on the college damaged our house. All the windows were broken. According to how my mother described it, the shockwave from the explosion felt like a powerful earthquake, and our house was shaking like never before. They were shocked but followed all the basic instructions in case of emergency, like hiding behind two walls and keeping all necessities close to them. However, I only got to know all the details later because my parents didn't want me to be too worried about them and panic.

Evacuation

After this event, my parents made the decision to evacuate from the city. It was still the beginning of the war. Metro stations and shelters were full of people. The roads were jammed with cars trying to move to the western parts of the country, which were safer. Trains and train stations were packed with people too. My parents took my grandma, their pets, and all the most important things into their car and, under the sounds of alarms, drove to our summer house outside of Kharkiv city. I called them in the middle of this move. My mother sounded rushed and irritated because I distracted them during such a dangerous and important moment with my call.

I tried not to call them until they got to a safe place and only prayed everything would be alright. It was a big relief for me to finally hear from them that they managed to arrive in the village. They didn't know what would happen to their apartment in the city or to their neighbors and friends from now on. But still, deep inside, they were hoping this all would end very soon—in just a few weeks or months maximum.

My parents called their close relatives and friends in Russia but discovered that all of them supported the Russian government and didn't accept the fact that Russia was the one that had attacked. The same happened to many other Ukrainians. We all felt betrayed by our close ones who lived in Russia, who put a good image of their country before the suffering of their relatives in Ukraine.

Of course, in my opinion, evacuating to the village near Kharkiv was not enough. Grandma was sick, and there were no hospitals in that small village. And since air attacks continued, you never actually knew where it was safe. No safe place was left in the country.

Japan Helps Refugees

From the first day of the war, I blamed myself for not being there with my family, with my friends, and my country. I felt painfully useless. Like the rest of Ukrainians abroad, I did what I could—donating money, sharing news about the war, talking to local media, participating in demos with hand-made posters saying "Save Ukraine." But still, it felt not enough. What's the use of me being in Japan, so far away?

"...donating money, sharing news about the war, talking to local media, participating in demos with hand-made posters saying "Save Ukraine." But still, it felt not enough."

And then, I heard that the Japanese government, for the first time in history, was opening the country to refugees and was ready to receive Ukrainian refugees and give them shelter. Finally, I thought I could help my family from the country where I decided to settle—the country I call my second home. It was so touching and special for me to receive this support for Ukrainian people from Japan.

However, putting it into action was not that easy. My mother and grandmother were against evacuation. It can sound shocking, but it's also understandable. It's their country, their house; they worked all their lives to have it. They had their routines, their plants, and their pets to take care of. My numerous phone calls begging them, no matter what, to leave the country for a while didn't bring results.

The phone was my only connection with my family. They always tried to smile and reassure me that everything would be alright and that they were doing okay. I didn't know if I would ever see them again. This thought made me so terrified that I took screenshots of my parents' faces during one of our regular calls just to remember the moment. Just in case.

Then, one day in March, our dog, a Pomeranian spitz called Mishmish, passed away in the village house where my parents had escaped. We still don't know the reason for his death for sure. It could have been stress from the numerous explosions he had heard or simply a virus he got from other dogs, which could have been deadly since there were no vets around the village, and he didn't get vaccinated on time. I think for my mom, this loss was too much, and she and my grandmother finally agreed to follow my dad and evacuate to Poland by car.

I didn't know if I would ever see them again. This thought made me so terrified, that I took screenshots of my parents' faces during one of our regular calls just to remember the moment. Just in case.

Travel to Poland and Japan

It was a long and tough way. The GPS didn't work because the Ukrainian military prevented the disclosure of movements on the roads in fear it could help the enemy side in planning their attacks. Road signs were demolished to confuse the enemy. Somehow my parents made it to the western border with Poland. They had to wait long hours in line to cross the border. They were surprised to see many Poles and volunteers from other countries helping them on the border. They were giving food, drinks, and other necessities, guiding them on where to go next and how to get support and a temporary place to stay. Never could they imagine that people could be so kind to total strangers.

My father drove 1500 km from Kharkiv to Warsaw, and there they could finally apply for visas to Japan, where I soon met them.

Since then, I've helped some of my friends evacuate to Japan as well. Unfortunately, my brother, who lives in Kyiv, could not evacuate with my parents due to his age and gender. Writing this now, after 1000 days of war, I still regret not being able to help my brother. It's hard to be a man during the war. Much harder than I could imagine. As a non-military woman, my movement in and out of the country is not restricted. I can go back to Ukraine anytime. But my brother cannot join our family abroad. All men are expected to join the armed forces, no matter if they want to or not. At this moment, my brother still works in Kyiv and does volunteer work from time to time.

Living here, in Japan, as an evacuee is not easy. It is very challenging, considering how our countries differ in terms of culture, lifestyle, language, and many other aspects. But we all keep working on helping them adapt to life here. And still, my parents, like many other Ukrainians, dream about going back to what they call their home—Ukraine. I truly wish it will soon be possible. Ukraine didn't fall; it kept fighting for freedom, for home, and for all the basic human values, which our enemy seems to have lost.

> **"Finally, I thought I could help my family from the country where I decided to settle - the country I call my second home. It was so touching and special for me to receive this support for Ukrainian people from Japan."**

REBUILDING

The War Came to My House

Natalia Makohon

JOURNALIST

Natalia was born and raised in the eastern part of Ukraine, in the Donetsk region. She graduated in TV and Radio Journalism from the Kyiv National University of Culture and worked for various TV channels in Kyiv. After leaving Ukraine in 2022, she continued her studies in journalism at Temple University in Tokyo, Japan, and worked in the Podcast Department of The Japan Times. After receiving the Chevening Scholarship, Natalia moved to the UK in 2024, where she studied Broadcast Journalism at the University of East Anglia.

“I had to start my life from scratch in a new country, not only once. I built my life again in Germany, then in Japan, and now in the UK. I don’t know how many times I'll have to start over, and where, without my family and friends.”

I'm at home in bed, blanketed in a thick silence. It's not a comfortable silence… I have a lot on my mind. As a journalist, I was reading the news every day, and there was so much about the rising tensions and escalation. I covered stories on Russian military movements and the amount of equipment near Ukraine's borders, but Russian officials kept saying it was just training. Intelligence reports from the US and UK suggested things weren't looking good. When Russia officially recognized the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic on February 21, 2022, it felt like a turning point. After that, the news started coming in faster, and the situation seemed to change by the minute.

Then, two days later, on February 24, I hear loud bangs in the distance, followed by car alarms — one, two, three. I want to sleep, but the sounds are too loud, too out of the ordinary. I open my eyes and check the time: it's 4:30 a.m. I glance out the window, and I can see smoke rising from the direction of an airfield.

My mother pokes her head into my room and says, "Dear, the war has started." When you hear those words, it feels like your entire world is crumbling right in front of you. It feels like you can't breathe, like everything just stops, and you're left feeling empty. My first reaction was to cry. I started crying before she even finished that short, terrible sentence. Another bang at that moment, and this time I feel the house tremble.

That's where I was two years ago, in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donetsk, listening to those explosions — my introduction to the soundtrack of warfare. I thought it would end in a few days.

We Have to Leave

One month later, we took shelter in our bathroom while our neighborhood was hit by Russian missiles. The air-raid siren was blaring in the background as we hid. We were there for maybe ten hours, and during that time, the decision was made: we would leave our home the next day. It was winter, and we were cold and cramped, sitting and hiding in that small space. When the siren stopped, we went to the kitchen to make some tea, but before it was even ready, the siren started again, and we rushed back to the bathroom. We checked the news every minute while explosions rumbled outside.

We took a train the next day. I spent the next 36 hours without sleep or food on the train, just water for my mother and me to share. When you feel such stress, you can't eat or think about food; your thoughts are only about how to stay alive and what to do next. We were able to get some space in one of the train compartments, which are typically meant for a family of four. Ours held 14 women and children, a dog, and a cat. The atmosphere was tense — some people were crying, some were silent, others couldn't stop talking, and everyone was glued to the news on their phones. We were all scared.

"When you feel such stress, you can't eat or think about food; your thoughts are only about how to stay alive and what to do next."

This shouldn't be happening to a 20-year-old. No! I should be with friends, hanging out at cafes in Kyiv, going to the movies, dancing at clubs, continuing my university studies, building a career in media, traveling around my wonderful country, visiting family in my lovely hometown, and following my dreams.

But everything changed. I had to start my life from scratch in a new country, not only once. I built my life again in Germany, then in Japan, and now in the UK. I don't know how many times I'll have to start over, and where, without my family and friends.
My mother and I tried to stay in Ukraine. After spending several days in Lviv and facing difficulty finding an empty apartment in this safer, western part of the country, we decided to move forward.

Our First Night of Peace
Our first night in Poland was our first night of peace since leaving our home. We received help from volunteers who provided us with tickets for transportation, free SIM cards, hot meals, and necessary translation. I felt their support strongly, I saw it in their eyes and actions. Although we changed many locations, I still have a strong feeling of kinship with the Polish people we met and who helped us. We didn't stay in Poland for long. As fate would have it, we found long-term accommodation in Germany and moved there. We were contacted via support groups on Facebook, which offered space in a small village near the border with France.

My Friend Egor
My feelings during that time were not about me, but about the people I knew. Egor, for example. He's older than me, we were in the same school, and he's my friend. My mom was his teacher in school. Since 2014, he had been a soldier defending our country in the Donetsk region.
When Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, Russian troops stormed the border with tanks and armored vehicles, heading to the strategic port city of Mariupol on the Sea of Azov. Russian soldiers attacked from two sides, quickly surrounding the city and pushing Ukrainian soldiers back toward the sea and Azovstal Iron and Steel Works. At the factory, Ukrainian soldiers from different units established a command center, and for the next three months, Azovstal became a crucial battleground that eventually became a trap for Ukrainian soldiers. Egor was there.

As a surviving soldier from Azovstal, Egor is being held captive in a Russian prison camp. He was sentenced in a sham trial to over 20 years and is held in a Russian prison. Most recently, I learned he was transferred to another prison camp infamous for its brutal torture practices. I cannot contact Egor, and I do not know how he is doing now.

> **"We were able to get some space in one of the train compartments, which are typically meant for a family of four. Ours held 14 women and children, a dog, and a cat."**

Individuals Make Change

After my time onboard Peace Boat, I realized that change comes from individuals — from their personal actions, testimonies, and determination to tell the truth about the war in Ukraine. It's people's stories that move others and make them understand what war does to ordinary people. We organized demonstrations and donations, visited local politicians, and raised awareness about the true nature of this war.

The war has changed everything: my dreams, my plans, my values. Happiness now means a clear sky free from missiles, a home untouched by destruction, and a family that's still whole. My purpose is no longer about planning my future, but about how I can help my country now.

Returning to Ukraine

Returning to Ukraine on Independence Day, August 24, 2024, for the first time since the full-scale invasion started, was overwhelming. I was home. Seeing the Ukrainian flag, hearing the sound of my language, tasting our cuisine, and seeing the field of flags on Maidan Nezalezhnosti honoring fallen heroes all filled me with pride and grief.

In recent weeks, the war has hit even closer: my step-uncle was captured, my grandfather suffered a stroke and was hospitalized, my friend lost her home, and my school was damaged by a missile. Egor is still in Russian captivity. The Russian army is only 20 km from my house. This is the reality I carry with me and the motivation that drives me forward.

“After my time onboard Peace Boat, I realized that change comes from individuals — from their personal actions, testimonies, and determination to tell the truth about the war in Ukraine.”

S U R V I V A L

I am a Witness and I am a Survivor

Maria Borzykh

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS GRADUATE

Maria is from Kharkiv, where she graduated with a degree in International Relations in 2017. She went on to do internships at the European Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ukraine and the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Kyiv. She left Ukraine in 2022 and moved to Nagoya, Japan, where she studies international law and translates from Japanese to Ukrainian for evacuees in Nagoya.

“ Then, a deep, roaring hum began to build. We held our breath. It grew louder, that monstrous sound devouring everything, and then, in a sickening moment, a bomb dropped, slamming into the ground, shaking our building as if it were made of paper. ”

On February 24, 2022, at 4:00 AM, the world as I knew it came apart. At that moment, my mom entered my room, white-faced, with wide eyes full of fear, and whispered words which, up until today, echo in my head: "Maria, the war has begun."

The next words fell from my lips instinctively, almost mechanically: "Take all our papers and money." I jumped from my bed and started to pack some essentials—clothes, money, jewelry, even socks and T-shirts—while my mind was unable to fathom what was happening. We could hear explosions from afar and, just in a few hours, the sounds of war became familiar.

With our bags packed, we looked for shelter. The nearest subway station, used as a shelter, was a 15-minute walk away across freezing, exposed streets. Too perilous. We scoured our neighborhood for a closer place to hide while my mother frantically called our relatives and friends. My mother's face shifted constantly as she made call after call, moving between tense worry and brief relief when someone picked up. I wanted to check on my own friends, but Russian cyberattacks had brought the internet down.

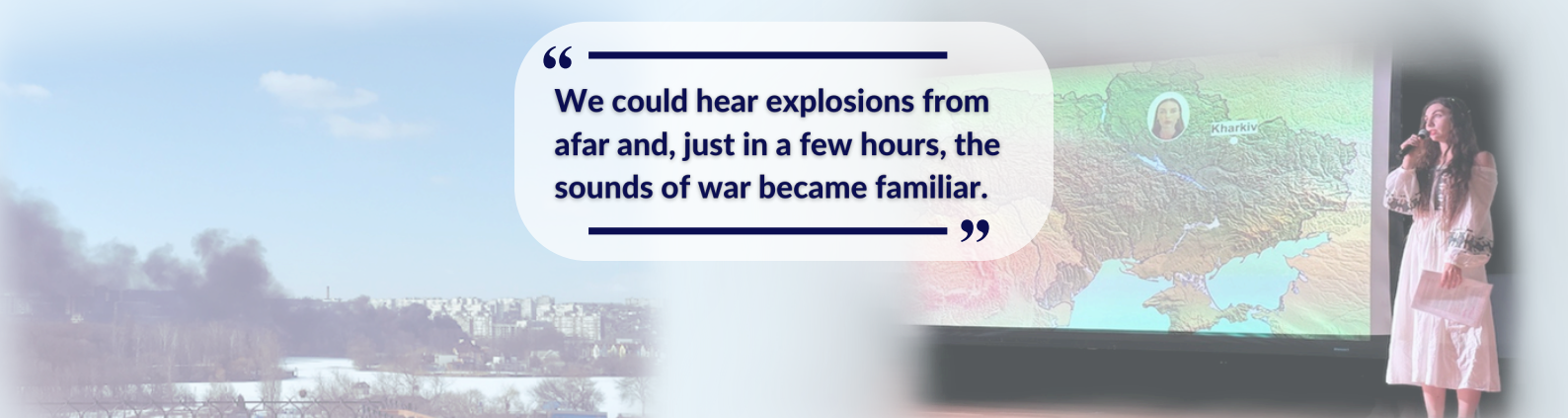
Later that day, a family friend took us into another shelter. It was dark; it was already 5 p.m. I saw sparks in the sky. I really wanted to believe they were fireworks, but they were missiles. The new shelter was cold, dim, and damp. The chill went straight into your bones, and I felt like the concrete walls were closing in on us. There were four rooms, each packed with people—over 60 in total: families, elderly people, children, and their pets. Everyone was kind to each other, but the whole place had a nervous, tense feeling.

Mom was on her phone constantly, trying to reach friends and family to make sure they were okay. She moved around, looking for better reception. Many people couldn't sit still because of fear and cold; they kept pacing, waiting for this nightmare to end.

There was also a young couple there with their three-year-old child. The husband joined a volunteer team a few days after the war began, using his own car to deliver food to elderly neighbors and pets. A few days later, we heard that his car had been hit by a missile, and he didn't survive.

The next day, we made our way back home to eat and take a quick shower, thinking that it would be okay because the shelter was only a three-minute walk away. As we sat in the kitchen and looked at the TV flashing scenes of destruction, I glanced over at Mom and her friend. The pain on their faces is impossible to put into words: their faces were contorted in fear and hopelessness. I felt nothing. My mind seemed to shut down, unable even to process the horror around me.
Later, heading back to the shelter, five missiles tore across the sky above us. We ran, hearts pounding. In war, even the simplest needs, like food or cleanliness, become dangerous luxuries.

“We could hear explosions from afar and, just in a few hours, the sounds of war became familiar.”



Life under bombing

I started feeling ill, feverish, and exhausted after a few days into the ordeal. Then the anger began to rise within me. Why were we supposed to be hiding like animals? Why do we have to live in these conditions all day, all night, with fear for our lives? I told my mother we needed to consider moving away.

When we finally made it back to our home, what we saw was like something out of a post-apocalyptic movie: burnt-out buildings, wrecked cars, and barricades everywhere we looked. Behind the ruins lay the bodies of people who had been hit.

Days blended into an indistinguishable blur of sleepless nights, as bombings and aircraft droned overhead. I heard a plane low and menacing. I knew exactly what this would mean: a bomb soon to follow. I jolted my mother awake, and we ran into the hallway, where two walls might protect us from the blast. Suddenly, the piercing sounds of an explosion cut through the night. I was sure we were dead. It was 2 a.m. We saw people running out of their apartments, as if trying to reach somewhere, not knowing where it would be safe to go. Among them was our neighbor, a young student living alone, his face white with fear. We called him in to join us, and soon, three of us were standing in the hallway of our flat—my mother, this boy, and I—embracing each other as if from that alone we could protect ourselves. We didn't speak; we just held on.

The silence stretched unbearably, punctuated by the echo of every heartbeat in my chest. Then, a deep, roaring hum began to build. We held our breath. It grew louder, that monstrous sound devouring everything, and then, in a sickening moment, a bomb dropped, slamming into the ground, shaking our building as if it were made of paper. I felt the walls around us bending under the shockwave, and I truly believed this was the end.

Decision to evacuate

When it finally stopped, my knees wouldn't stop shaking, even though I could hardly feel them. That night, the Russian army dropped four bombs on my street. When it all finally stopped, we didn't talk much. I think we were all focused on one thing: we were still alive. Suddenly, a chill filled the room, as if we were standing outside. Our windows were broken again. Everything that once seemed essential—my clothes, my cosmetics, some things that I liked—had instantly become meaningless.

That night, we made a quiet decision: as soon as the curfew ends, we will go straight to the train station.

When we packed our bags with just two pairs of sneakers, two T-shirts, and some socks for Mom and me, we went outside to meet my friend and his family to head together to the train station. I should also mention that gasoline had become so scarce and valuable that the taxi prices had skyrocketed. Stepping outside the house, we saw our street covered by broken glass everywhere. We were walking over shards, hearing them crack under our feet.

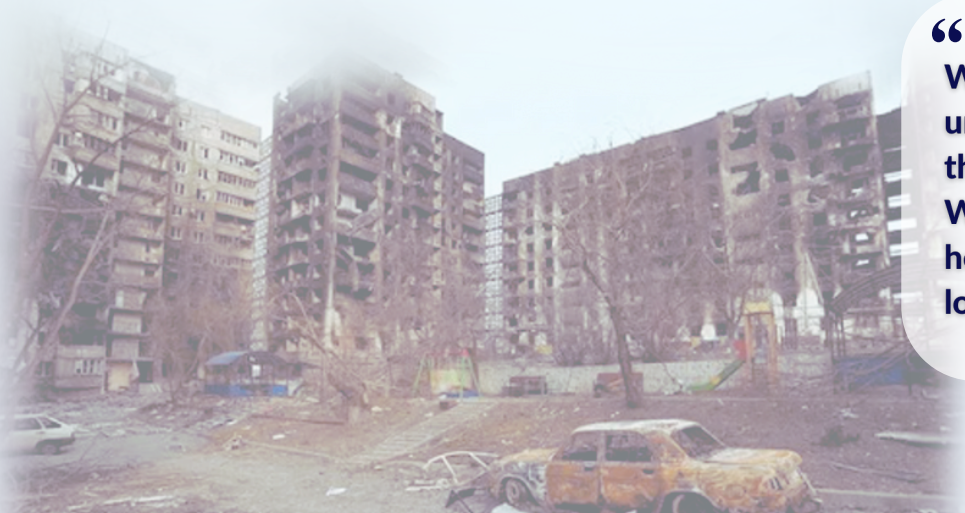
“Everything that once seemed essential—my clothes, my cosmetics, some things that I liked—had instantly become meaningless.”

Across the street, we saw ruined buildings, fractured walls, and a mess of concrete and glass. We were alive, yes, but so many people had died, been burned alive, or crushed under the wreckage. At that moment, I could feel the heavy, bitter mix of relief and guilt: we had been spared, but our lives were entwined with the tragedy of those less fortunate.

Our time to leave Kharkiv had arrived. I was sick, weakened by lack of sleep, and filled with anger. Why must we live like this, underground, deprived of even the most basic human needs? Why do we have to leave our home, everything we knew and loved, just for survival?

Getting out was its own nightmare. The train schedule was chaotic because of the constant Russian attacks. Nobody knew when the train would arrive, or whether it would arrive at all. Everywhere around us, missiles tore through the skies, at times so close that we felt we were just a heartbeat from disaster. At each siren, we would jump, expecting the worst, hoping the missiles would pass over us.
Finally, when we found a train headed west, it was full. The train was filled with people, mostly women, children, and a variety of pets: dogs, cats, parrots, even turtles. We have a big Vietnamese community in Kharkiv, so many Vietnamese people were with us on the train. I also saw many international students from different countries. There weren't many men, and although everyone was exhausted, people were still kind to each other. People sat in every available space. My mother and I didn't have seats, so we stood in the train for hours, crouching on the floor when our legs gave out. A day-long trip from Kharkiv to Bukovel dragged into two days of endless stops and erratic detours as the train took side routes, skirting areas held by the Russians.

My questions
On the second day of the journey, my mother had her birthday. It is a day that I will never forget, as on that cold, uncertain, and really terrifying night, we whispered our birthday wishes to her. It was a birthday that was supposed to be full of joy and laughter with family, but which, instead, was a tribute to endurance against terror. I looked at the people around me, at the faces of other Ukrainians in this crowded train: just ordinary people who several days ago had been living their usual lives, celebrating holidays, going to work, enjoying simple, everyday moments. I felt the surge of anger and helplessness. Why? Why would that country next to us, the so-called "brother nation," unleash their hostility on us, destroying everything in their path without mercy? These questions keep taunting me day by day.
I am a witness and I am a survivor. My story may sound unique, but it's just one among thousands. Each Ukrainian carries his own version of this nightmare story—too real, too harrowing to be fully captured. More must be done by international leaders, organizations, and laws. This isn't a script from Hollywood. This is real life, and with each passing day, it brings new losses, new scars.



> **“Why must we live like this, underground, deprived of even the most basic human needs? Why do we have to leave our home, everything we knew and loved, just for survival?”**

FRACTURED

The War Divided my Family

Yuliia Chekhovska

LINGUIST

Yuliia was born in a small town in western part of Ukraine and graduated in English and German Linguistics at the Kyiv University, and then continued her linguistics studies in Belgium and Germany. In 2020, she moved to Japan, where she worked as a guest lecturer at Chiba Public University. She is now studying data science and developing an educational charity called “10Billion” that prepares young people for jobs with high social impact.

> “...With each call to our relatives, it became clearer that Russian propaganda had woven a deep barrier between us. At some point, we ceased all communication”

December 15, 2021
“You’ll have a Russian passport soon,” my American colleague said, smirking. “Russian troops were spotted at Ukraine’s eastern border, American news reported”. My heart sank to the floor. I looked at him, terrified. He recognized his bluntness and quickly apologized: “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.” But it was too late, the words lodged in my mind, and fear was born.

I remember calling my mother that day and telling her the news my American colleague so bluntly sprung on me. “They’ve occupied Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk regions since 2014 - do you think they’ll move further into Ukraine now?”, I asked. She began sounding anxious, almost panicked. Russian troops were also building up near the Belarusian border, some 200 km from my hometown, while Russian officials repeatedly denied any plans to attack Ukraine. I thought maybe I shouldn’t have told her. My mother was in a fragile state. Just five months ago, my father had passed away, and the unexpected news shattered her. She and my older brother lived in my hometown. I was the only one who left, and she felt lonely.

We agreed that an invasion was possible and that she should have her emergency backpack ready, just in case. But my brother wasn’t convinced. “There’s no way they’re stupid enough to attack us again,” he said. The future of Ukraine seemed more hopeful, with recent reforms in education, digitalization, and agricultural progress. We just couldn’t grasp it. No one could.

February 24, 2022
I was in my office at the high school where I teach, when my colleague came in that morning. “They have started the fire. Ukraine is under attack. Sorry.” I ran outside of the office and quickly phoned my mum. No response. My grandma. Nothing. I texted my brother. He replied: “We are in the basement with our neighbours, can’t talk right now.” I opened Instagram to write to my friends. And then I saw it. Dozens of videos of falling missiles, pictures of ruins, blood, tears. That was the reality.

February 25, 2022
My friend was in Serbia on a business trip when the war started, his wife at home in Kyiv. He told me that she did not want him to come back to Ukraine now. “Stay there, it’s safer”, she said. But he couldn’t. He took the first flight back to Kyiv the same day. He knew he couldn't stay away. Not from his family, not from his land.

February 26, 2022
My Japanese colleagues noticed how I suddenly changed. That day I took more than dozens of breaks to call my family and friends, and they just knowingly passed by in the corridor giving me a sad look. The news from Ukraine has become headlines all over Japan and I was the only Ukrainian my colleagues knew. Some came up to me and quietly asked “Is your family alright?” “For now”, I replied, trying to keep myself composed.

I was far from alright. “Should I buy a ticket and fly back right now?” “Don’t be stupid!”, my mum wrote to me, “Stay where you are, in safety”. Safety?! My body was safe, but my mind was scrolling through videos and messages, explosive sounds and terrifying pictures. Day and night I watched online how the Russian troops are moving towards the capital - Kyiv. The Russians were gloating. “Kiev (a misspelling of the Ukrainian capital Russia uses to diminish the Ukrainian historical heritage) in three days!”, Russian propaganda news shouted everywhere.

All kinds of thoughts started crawling into my head. Maybe I wasn't doing enough. I asked myself if I was simply hiding in safety, away from the real fight, as if I was betraying those who were on the front lines.

Did I truly deserve the peace I had? Did I deserve to be far from the destruction, the chaos, the loss? My family, my friends were fighting. And here I was, detached, lonely and separated from the others by the news from my family in Ukraine, my fears and worries. I wanted to talk to the world and tell the truth.

March 2022

Many Ukrainians have had to cut ties with family in Russia since the war began. To give some historical context, Ukraine and Russia, though often involuntarily, shared a long and complex history. When Ukraine was pulled into the Soviet Union, Ukrainians and Russians would move around taking available work posts which led to many intermarriages. After Ukraine regained its independence, the family ties remained, and many had relatives on both sides of the border. My paternal aunt was one such Ukrainian who married a Russian and settled in Russia. Although I've never been to Russia, I regularly met my aunt and cousin, who frequently visited us in Ukraine. My uncle, however, never did, claiming he disliked going to Ukraine. I never knew why.

My family's connection to Russia goes back further. My great-grandmother moved to western Ukraine from Russia to marry my great-grandfather. I remember her telling me stories of the severe hunger in the 1930s, showing with her palm how little bread they received while working on a *kolkhoz* (a collective farm under Soviet rule). I'm almost embarrassed to admit that I only discovered she was Russian after her death in 2010, when my mother showed me her passport. She never spoke in Russian, and her Ukrainian was flawless. And even the revelation that she had a different passport didn't change anything. To me, she was simply my great-grandmother.

This was my family's background and our connection to Russia, until the 2013 Revolution of Dignity began in Ukraine, and everything spiralled downward. When the corrupt Ukrainian president Wiktor Yanukovych fled to Russia, a firestorm of Russian misinformation followed. We began hearing accusations of being "Nazis" and claims of Russian language suppression. Our liberal values were mocked in Russian media which were deemed as perverse. In response, Russia introduced the 2013 anti-LGTB law in Russia. Worst of all, my relatives in Russia believed all these lies.

> **And here I was, detached, lonely and separated from the others by the news from my family in Ukraine, my fears and worries. I wanted to talk to the world and tell the truth.**

In 2014, my family had an online call with our Russian relatives, and it went something like this:
“So, how is the situation in Ukraine these days?”
“It’s tense, I’m sure you’ve seen the news.”
“Yes, we saw that Ukrainians are killing each other. Why are you doing this?”
“...What?”
“Russian news is telling us about Ukrainian Nazis eating babies.”

We were stunned. My aunt didn’t believe that extreme part about babies, but she was convinced people were getting beaten on the streets of Lviv (western part of Ukraine) for speaking Russian. She believed this about her own home country where she grew up. In disbelief, we invited her to visit Ukraine and see it for herself.

We were still family, and it felt unimaginable to cut ties with family just because of media propaganda. Or should we? She visited us in 2015, and - no Nazis in sight. She returned to Saint Petersburg assured that Ukraine wasn’t in the grip of extremists. The things between us seemed to settle.

Then came 2022, and the Russian invasion changed everything. Studies have shown that the term “Nazi” was almost non-existent in Russian media coverage of Ukraine in 2014. But in 2022, the term surged in use as Putin’s regime needed it to justify the war. This manipulation of the narrative created a sense of moral acceptance of the invasion among ordinary Russians, as if they bore no responsibility for their government’s actions. “We’re not invading Ukraine,” they said. “We’re liberating it from Nazis.”

This kind of propaganda had affected my aunt in 2022. First, she claimed it was a “civil war,” not a Russian invasion. “You’re fighting your separatists,” she said, “Russia has nothing to do with it.” Even when the media showed Russian soldiers among the so-called separatists, my aunt and my uncle clung to their beliefs. “I just want this war to end,” my aunt would say. “The sooner it’s over, the sooner we can go back to being brotherly nations again. I just want peace.”

The “brotherhood of nations” theme echoed Putin’s rhetoric, invoking myths about the origins of the Slavic people and Russia as the “mother of all Slavs.” This narrative served as a mask for other motives, as Russia seized mineral-rich territories and cut off Ukraine’s access to the Black and Azov seas. While the world debated Putin’s distorted history, Russia was already profiting from Ukrainian resources and ensuring Europe’s reliance on Russian pipelines.

“First, she claimed it was a “civil war,” not a Russian invasion. “You’re fighting your separatists,” she said, “Russia has nothing to do with it.”

August, 2023

With each call to our relatives, it became clearer that Russian propaganda had woven a deep barrier between us. At some point, we ceased all communication. My family in Ukraine was hurt by the constant denial of truth we encountered, even my relatives in Russia could see how Russian missiles ravaged Ukraine daily. In my town, dozens of fallen soldiers were returned home in coffins, each one followed by a funeral procession with the whole town kneeling before our heroes. The wall of portraits that had been there since 2013 began to grow with more and more faces, including some from my school.

I talked to my cousin in Russia, who is the same age as me. She was condemning my aunt and uncle for believing the Russian propaganda news. “Don’t trust what you see. Always check different sources”, I told her. I want to believe, even though we no longer talk, that she knows the truth. She follows me on social media, and can see every update, every piece of news about the war in Ukraine… the murdered civilians, the children… the Olenivka massacre… and the Bucha massacre. She sees this. She keeps watching.

Maybe, my family is not lost. Perhaps there is still a chance, in the silence and in the distance, for the truth to break through. For now, I hold on to that hope.

“Maybe, my family is not lost. Perhaps there is still a chance, in the silence and in the distance, for the truth to break through. For now, I hold on to that hope.”

This booklet was produced by Peace Boat. We express our deep thanks to the Ukrainian Youth Ambassadors for sharing their stories with us and encouraging so many who joined Peace Boat and around the world to take action for peace.

PEACE BOAT

Designed by Val Nishwa Wedenayake